

DUNGEON CRAWLER - DRAGON SLAYER

PROLOGUE: CINDERS

Word came in the dead of night to Lady Danei Sharewood of an attack. Not by raiders this time, which had become all too common over the last few months, but instead it was the great beast itself and very near the border of the town Kriegan's Pass. A farmhouse had been its target. The alarm came by rider, one of the farmers neighbours witnessed the attack and rushed to town for help. Lady Danei told him to rouse the guard immediately. Grabbing a spear, sword, shield and mounting her steed, she sped away in to the night. The firelight could be seen far in the distance over the grassy hills of the neighbouring land. Again she would arrive too late to confront the monster that had done this.

She stood impotently, spear and shield limp in hand, as she surveyed the carnage before her. She was a beautiful woman, strong and in perfect shape for her age of twenty-eight. She was Keldornan through and through, with pale skin, long blonde hair and steel blue eyes. Occasionally a wave of heat and billowing smoke from the burning structures would wash over her pale features. Her fair blonde hair had been tied back with a simple leather string, keeping its long straight length away from her sharp feminine features. The smell of burning wood and flesh made her soft blue eyes water. She had not bothered to don her armour, which anyone would have considered suicide. But each time she had spared the time to take that precaution she had arrived far too late to do anything. This time she had arrived simply moments too late, she could still feel the air stirring around her as it seemed to be rushing around to fill the void left by something of terrible power. Its smell still lingered in the air. The smell of old charred stone.

At one point she had bothered to use the very precious alchemist potions to make the journey in an instant. She teleported within striking distance of the beast with her team of knights, spell-casters and invokers only to watch the beasts great form flying away in the distant horizon. There seemed to be no way of knowing when the beast would strike and where. They were never ready enough. She knew that all she would need was one chance.

No one knew why the ancient beast had recently made its presence known. Every few years it had been known to roam the countryside, emerging to gorge on forest creatures and occasionally terrorize unfortunate travellers. The larger settlements amongst the plains, and a great distance from the IceCrest Mountains, had always been left alone.

When the attacks first came, it was decided that the soldiers would be pulled back, to keep them closer to the garrison to prevent them from being picked off. With the soldiers retracted closer to the towns and villages, the orcish raiders had become even more brazen in the outskirts. Quite possibly drawing the beast further from its normal pattern.

The point was lost to Lady Danei, she watched as though from within a haze. Her body left a shell by her spirit.

All that remained of the farmhouse were the splintered and charred remnants of a farmhouse, barn, fence and wagons. The battered and sundered bodies of cattle, dog, and horses lay scattered across the ground. Smaller farm animals such as chickens and rabbits lay crushed within massive footprints or scurried along panic stricken by what had transpired. A breeze moved a bloodied piece of cloth which brought Danei's attention to the remains of a girl. And eventually across the rest of the family that had once lived here. She knew them each by name. She had seen this before, which was far too often as of late, and her heart filled with frustration and rage. Tears welled in her eyes, she had held them long enough now and let them flow.

The first compatriot to arrive was Keron. He did not say a word as he gathered her steed and approached her, he waited patiently behind her for acknowledgement. He was a trustworthy young warrior, whom someday might make a fine knight. She had taken him under her own wing for a time, teaching him the finer points of responsibility that his previous mentor had failed to recognise. Of course, he could not teach what he himself did not know.

Eventually an entourage of invocers arrived, prepared to give the rites and help those that they could. It was nearing morning, Danei was exhausted, physically and emotionally. As she watched the first rays of the sun soften the darkness of the horizon to a cold azure, she decided this day would be the day she would steel her fate.

“This has to end Keron,” her voice was steeled. He simply nodded in agreement.

CHAPTER ONE: THE JOURNEY

“What brings you out here Shade?” It was Danei Sharewood. She was clad in customized full plate armour and carried an ornate long sword both held a faint blue aura.

The tall slender man turned and smiled wickedly at her, “There’s a reward for that creature, not to mention its hoarded treasure.” He kept his black cloak raised, but they knew him well.

“Sounds like your kind of journey Shade,” the voice of the young man came from behind him and he turned to see the armoured warrior named Keron standing by the stone markers used to guide travelers.

His smile faded, “Hmm, I should have known you would tag along with Lady Sharewood, Keron.”

“I invited him along Shade, unlike you.” Danei smiled sarcastically and turned back to the campfire. “How did you catch up to us?”

Shade went back to his packs and began pulling out his supplies, “You’re warriors, you travel slowly. I travel lightly.”

“Who are they?” Keron indicated with the nod of his head three travelers next to the slender man.

Shade looked over in their direction and a sly smile spread across his face, “My campaign Keron.”

Danei wandered by with her bed roll, “I don’t recognize any of them Shade, what happened to the others?”

Shade looked as though he were being accused of something, it only lasted a moment. “They went their separate ways, well all except Hailian. Don’t you recognize her?”

Danei stopped what she was doing and looked at the brawny woman as she unloaded her packs, deep scars covered her muscular form, the scars of battle. “No.” She paused in thought, “No, I did not. She has gotten... older.” She averted her eyes when she realized that she was starrng.

Hailian seemed emotionless as she unpacked her equipment and set it about where their parties’ campsite would be. She didn’t seem to take notice of the conversation next to her, or did not show concern of it.

“Who are the others?” asked Danei.

Shade did not seem like he wanted to share right away, but a smile slowly spread across his face. “The girl is Kayla Stedder, an archer. Best I’ve seen in a while. She was eager to come and didn’t ask for much in return.”

Danei didn’t look over her shoulder when she spoke, “She’s just a girl Shade, send her home.”

Shade’s eyes narrowed, “She’s better than you think Lady Danei. You might know her as Hawkfeather.”

Danei, who had started cooking, looked up to see Grimtok’s broad grin, he gave a subtle shrug with his broad shoulders. His short, stocky body and the distinguishing points on his ears helped to identify his lineage as a dwarf. He had a full thick golden beard braided as was the hair on this head. He wore very heavy armour and rested a battle axe at this side.

“Hawkfeather,” Keron asked, “I thought she was in the Forest of Tears?”

The wisp of a girl smiled, “I had just arrived in Kriegan’s Pass when Shade announced he was heading after you. Sounded like a challenge, so I came.” She was fair, slender, slight and with light brown hair and blue eyes.

Danei’s face became cold, “Fables are one thing, experience is another. Be careful where you aim your bow Kayla we’re going to have to get very close very quickly in there and things are going to get confusing. You’re still too young.”

The girl’s smile disappeared and she glared at Danei’s back.

Shade raised an eyebrow, “So were we at one time Danei! I believe you know the other man as Sarandhu Nazar, the Blackhanded.”

Danei’s eyes widened and Grimtok stood slowly in front of her just as surprised. They turned to see the hooded charcoal cloak of the man looking in their direction. Keron even bothered to draw his sword.

Shade raised his gloved hand and stepped between them. “Now, now, Keron. You pull that out and you might have to use it.”

Keron knew he was being challenged and stepped forward.

“Keron,” Danei stopped him with that single command Keron stopped in mid stride Keron sniped, “What are you doing with a Necromancer in the Grasslands Shade?”

The cloaked figure stepped forward and dropped his hood back to reveal the foreign features of an Azrahdi, “Is that what they call a Sorcerer in these lands now?”

“No, the boy speaks too quickly,” answered Grimtok. The warrior dwarf stood tense on the other side of the campfire. “We are aware of your trade Blackhanded. As I am sure you are aware of our laws.”

The dark skinned man replied wisely with a slight bow, “Of course Sir Glimdus! No raising the dead, only summoning is permitted. I know the laws of Keldorna, as I know those of my own land.”

“How clever of you to bring a Sorcerer, Shade. Now no one will be watching you slide the knife in to our backs.” It was another gold dwarf, a female, garbed in robes and armour. A heavy silver shield and sun symbol dangled from around her neck.

Shade shook his head, “You shouldn’t worry about us Drogeda, not with your noble presence to watch over us.” He brought his hands together and bowed to her.

“Someday you’re mockery of faith will be your undoing Shade!” She turned her back to him and walked to the third campsite.

Shade sneered after her and spoke to Danei, “She’s still alive huh? Where’s Sibra these days?”

Danei tasted her provisions, “He’s around. Probably watching us right now.”

Shade looked around suddenly spooked and muttered under his breath, "I hate that." He went and sat down with his company as they started the fire darting glances into the surrounding forest.

Grimtok sat down beside Danei holding a flask of ale. "Shade brings bad company my Lady."

She sighed, "I know Grimtok, but it is a free land. He's free to go where he chooses." She looked over to the third campfire, "How are the others holding up?"

"Darva's not used to traveling so quietly, she's been looking forward to seeing some of her kin. I believe Karzden is able to keep her entertained at times, but it's a long road and dwarves are not given to idle conversation. Arathane is as quiet as ever, I see." He was changing topics, "Still seeking vengeance."

Danei began to eat, "That is no way to live a life."

"You don't need to tell me my Lady, but his misfortune is our fortune. He has been a trustworthy companion."

A man's voice came from the woods beside them, "Trusting elves Grimtok? What next, trust Orcs?" Sibra's heavily bearded face came out of the woods with a wide grin. His beard was a black ragged mess with copper tones. His teeth were crooked and dirty, as was his flesh and his attire. He wore furs and leathers that looked like they'd been stitched together. He was a tall, fit brawny man.

"I would do no such thing~" growled Grimtok.

"I'm sure he meant it in jest Grimtok," chided Darva who came to stand beside them. She was darker skinned, but not as dark as Sarandhu, and her eyes were sky blue.

"Barbarians..." bursted Grimtok, "only good for drinking with or fighting with."

"What else is there?" chided Sibra.

Keron who stood behind them starrng towards Shade's campsite noticed that Hailian's head turned to their direction and she made a motion to stand. Shade's gesture seemed to stop her, but Keron couldn't be sure what he said to her. He whispered over his shoulder to Danei, "What about them? I mean, Shade certainly travels with strange company? A Sorcerer, a fabled child archer, and a Berserker..."

Darva answered him, "He likes to journey with interesting peoples, the stranger the better. Isn't that Hailian, Lady Sharewood? She's grown so much." Keron turned to look at the strangely soft voice and found his gaze locked to Darva's.

Lady Danei sighed with resignation, "You're not that much older than her Keron. Strange, how I could not picture her at this age. Most berserkers don't survive as long unless they're taken care of. Shade never journey's with priests or clerics if he can help it..."

"I suppose it would make sense, a berserker would be rather distracting; she would give Shade enough time to do what he wanted I'm sure. Perhaps Shade cares for her himself?" Grimtok was guessing, but did not give his question much conviction.

Drogeda joined the conversation, "I doubt that man is capable."

A taller slender man stood with her, his ears were very long, the points ending above his blonde head...a wood elf.

“Drogeda, how are you, love!” Sibra picked up the stocky dwarf and spun her around. She took it stone-faced.

“I am fine you oaf, now place me on the ground where I belong.”

As he did he smiled widely, “I think you’re blushing my friend.”

Grimtok interrupted, “Dwarves don’t blush barbarian, even when they drink their fill!”

“Still serving the Light inside that dark gloomy temple little one?” Sibra continued.

Drogeda glared at him, “Still worshiping ancient dead spirits filthy one?”

“There’s that spirit I like to see!” he roared with laughter. “Darva Vanzante, you’ve turned into a beautiful young woman indeed! Come here and give Sibra a hug!”

She smiled until he hugged her and she winced at the smell of his fur hide cloak, and whatever medicines he was carrying that wafted from his medicine bag. The contrast was astounding, her soft blue silks and heavily painted, dainty features against his rugged and ragged furs and hide.

“Arathane.” He did not touch Arathane he simply nodded. “Now where’s that Karzden Drimot?” He looked back and forth until he saw the Dwarven adventurer where everyone least expected, sitting and talking to Shade. “Well now! There’s something you don’t see every day!”

Those gathered around the campfires looked over to see the Dwarf having a conversation with the unsavoury individual.

Grimtok snorted, “Karzden’s an adventurer alright, he never was right in the head.”

“If he was he would have been a warrior or a priest!” added Drogeda.

Sibra laughed, “Even dwarves have thieves Grimtok.”

At this Grimtok threw down his drink, grabbed his axe and stood in what appeared to be one motion. Sibra jumped back, his laugh cut short.

Lady Danei grabbed Grimtok’s arm, “Be at ease Grimtok! You owe him three more debts still.”

Grimtok ground his teeth and growled, “You’re head will come off someday Sibra if you’re tongue continues its ways!”

“Dwarves explore and repossess Sibra. They do not steal,” Drogeda was much calmer than Grimtok. It was not necessarily her place to avenge, but to educate.

“Aye. Alright!” he agreed, not wanting to face the dwarf’s wrath. “How about some mountain spirits then!”

The commotion seemed to distract everyone briefly, Keron moved closer to Darva and spoke as softly as he could, "I do not believe we have met, I am Keron Krigen. Lady Danei Sharewood' old apprentice."

She smiled warmly and extended her hand palm down, he kissed it and bowed drawing her from the crowd, "Darva Vanzante. We have seen each other before though apprentice, while you were training I believe."

"I apologize, but I do not recall."

She paused with a soft smile to maintain her composure, "It was a long time ago, my family was passing through Kriegan's Pass, I believe you were in training then. It was four seasons ago now."

Keron seemed embarrassed, "I was in training four years ago, but under Dakon Armad the master of swords. How did you come into the company of Grimtok?"

"My people are travelers, we met them traveling the road between Azrahda and Keldorna. My father knows and trusts Grimtok, so I joined them to live adventures like in the stories that the bards tell," her eyes beamed with a dreamers glimmer.

"Isn't it rather dangerous for a traveler to be on this quest?"

She smiled shyly, "Well the Gypsy way is to travel and learn, along the roads I learned to harness the power of the wind. Its secrets and its stories."

Keron furrowed his brow, "An Air Elementalist?"

She nodded thoughtfully, "Yes. An Air Elementalist as you would call us, Stormcatcher to others, and white mage to others still. It depends on your land I suppose."

Grimtok had not only settled down with Sibra for a drink of his barbarian ale, but they were laughing and patting one another on the back telling each other old stories.

Arathane stepped behind Lady Danei and whispered into her ear, "I will watch the Shade, Drogeda will watch the Blackhanded, you must watch the Berserker." His voice was soft and like a dream almost forgotten after it was spoken.

Danei looked up and saw Drogeda nod her head in agreement from across the campfire. Lady Sharewood knew that Arathane had already stepped back and away from her.

Between one of Sibra's stories Lady Sharewood leaned over to Keron's ear and said, "Do not look in her direction when I say her name or when I have finished talking to you either." Keron stared straight ahead towards the forest and nodded. "You will watch the girl, Kayla, tell me if you see anything suspicious Keron, anything at all." She pulled away from him; he simply nodded.

When she turned and walked away Keron couldn't help but glimpse in the direction of the girl sitting by the fire quietly not talking to anyone. She looked so out of place there, and alone. He decided to go and talk to her in hopes that she would think Lady Sharewood had told him to.

“Would you join me by the fire Lady Darva?” She blushed with a smile. Taking Darva’s hand and smiling he brought her to Shade’s fire.

Danei sat down beside Grimtok and watched Keron go over to the other campfire and sit down. She gave a look of surprise and quickly concealed it. “Interesting approach Keron,” she muttered under her breath.

Grimtok looked at her, stone faced, “There are too many children with us these days.”

Lady Sharewood tilted her head slightly, “They are seasoned; they’ve seen their share of battles. Even Darva who has not seen any true battles.”

A deep chuckle came from Grimtok, “They’ve never seen this before.”

Danei laughed lightly herself, “We’ve never seen this before old man.”

They let it get quiet, and then Grimtok leaned into Danei, “What will we do about Shade?”

She took a drink of ale, “We will watch him.”

”He may prove to be useful in there,” Grimtok smiled and gulped a drink.

She stared into the fire, “Yes, he may.”

Behind them the stone faces of the moss-covered travel markers stared blankly into the night as they did every night for ages, into the darkness.

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“Funny that Shade has not rushed on ahead, seeing as we can only move as quickly as the dwarves.” Sibra wasn’t being impolite this time, just stating a point. At least he said it quietly enough to Danei that it would not cost him any more debts to Grimtok.

She kept their pace ahead of the others, “There have been too many Orcish raids lately, and with the beast weakening the areas reserve warriors we’ve had to draw the others back. The Orcs have become bold. He’s probably afraid of running into too many of them without enough muscle around. No sense in wasting good swords that are going in the same direction as you are.”

“I doubt Hailian and Sarandhu would be so easily defeated.” Sibra paused before continuing, “How long has it been since you’ve seen Hailian? She must have only been a girl!”

Sighing Danei resigned, “Yes, she was. But she’s always had the rage inside of her, even as a child. I was there when Shade took her from the village. It was right after a rather brash display of that rage. I cannot remember how many times I had to arrest her. I never thought she would survive so long with him. With him of all people!”

Arathane stood on the ridge of the next hill waiting.

The three dwarves followed Sibra and Danei.

Keron was walking behind their own party still talking to Kayla, “I told him to keep an eye on her not join them.” It was not a jealousy that she was feeling, but nothing out of love, just of camaraderie. She almost raised the man, taught him everything she knew even before he became her “apprentice”.

Sarandhu, Hailian and Shade walked behind them single file.

The paths were beginning to get rocky as they were approaching the Icecrest Mountains. Arathane stayed ahead to scout things out, but stayed close by enough that if there was trouble he would be able to act quickly.

Danei watched him, “He’s still afraid of going too far away.”

Sibra knew she was talking about Arathane, “Can you blame him?”

“No,” she whispered, “But I wish he would stop blaming himself.”

The barbarian was quiet, he actually felt compelled to speak quietly about Arathane, possibly out of respect if he was capable of such a thing, “It could just have easily been him, and they never would have found him.”

They were close enough to Arathane that they stopped talking. Arathane did not seem to care and went ahead on the path again. He took three steps down the path when the whistle of an arrow came from the woods, he didn’t see it coming, but it just cut across his path. He tucked and rolled away from the sound, but another arrow coming from the other side caught him in the arm. He gritted his teeth and screamed through them.

Arathane took only a moment to notice the source of the arrows were two Orcs on either side of the path several meters in the forest, but that was the least of his worries as the pain shot through his body. Battle cries came from behind him and in front of him, the battle cries of Orcs.

The others moved into position and waited. In the distance the Orcs burst from their waiting positions wielding axes.

What did surprise Arathane was the giant form that lumbered towards him from ahead. Its great size, yellowish skin and sloped brow gave it away as an ogre. Behind it came two skeletons and on their flank came three powerful orcish warriors.

The Orcish archers fired again. The first archer missed Arathane again, the second archer managed to graze Arathane as he twisted away to avoid being killed.

Arathane gritted his teeth and scanned his surroundings before knocking an arrow with a shaking arm and fired. The arrow found its way to the Orcish archer’s chest. It fell to the ground.

The main body of the group was facing eight Orcs that were charging from the sides, but the crushing blow would come from ahead from the obvious powerhouses that charged forward.

Danei and Keron reacted quickly charging the great jaundiced lumbering creature, meeting it halfway would trap them, but leave the others time to work.

Sibra stopped just behind Arathane braced him to withdraw the arrow and began summoning a nature spirit which healed the wound.

Grimtok set himself.

Karzden took a position to his flank and hurled a throwing axe at a charging Orc. The Orc yipped as the flying axe clipped it.

Drogeda took stock of the situation, she seemed to have time thus far and decided to summon the power of Light for Grimtok, and he began to radiate with that power.

Kayla's arrows both found one Orcish warrior, the second arrow sunk into its throat and it dropped to the ground gurgling on its own blood.

Darva moved into position casting a spell, suddenly a chaotic electrical windstorm sprung forth encompassing three orcs. They were shocked when they were thrown several feet through the woods scattered by her powerful spell.

Sarandhu moved in between Drogeda and Karzden around him crawled up two ghouls and a mummy. Drogeda, who had her back to the summoning, probably would have been revolted, but only Darva and Shade had bared witness to it. Darva shuddered, while Shade grinned in approval.

Karzden found himself standing beside a ghou, he gritted his teeth and glared at Sarandhu. Hailian on the other hand, charged headlong into the oncoming Orcs swinging her battleaxe over her head. The first cut deeply into the Orcs chest, but the second attack cut it from its shoulder to the bottom of its ribs.

Shade ducking from around a tree brought his gloved hand up and slung it forward as though holding a dagger. From his hand came five glowing blades, three sailed straight at a second Orc next to Hailian, two went towards the next Orc in line that Karzden had wounded with his axe. His first target survived, but his second target dropped to the ground.

Danei found herself and Keron outnumbered six to two. A well-adorned Orc brandishing a battleaxe took two swings at Danei's side, she evaded the two well aimed strikes now having to decide between facing it or the ogre.

The last two Orcs from the side attack continued to charge forward, one arched around to face Hailian and took a feeble swing with its mace at her head. In her rage she barely noticed the attempt as she turned on it.

The second Orc plodded on towards the bulk of the party apparently intent on attacking the ghou. Orcs weren't the brightest creature in the land, but their stupidity did make them somewhat fearless during the start of a battle.

Danei and Keron suddenly realized that they were also facing two Orcish Berserkers on top of the powerful Orc and the giant ogre. This was definitely more trouble than they bargained for. The Berserker attacking Danei clipped her on the second flailing hit, but the one facing Keron flattened him with two hits from its mace. Danei screamed with rage as Keron fell.

Arathane narrowly avoided the second archer again as he sidestepped around the foliage and knocked an arrow of his own. His own blood was making it difficult to draw the bow.

Sarandhu was surprised when his mummy and ghouls vanished in a sparkle of light and crumbled to dust. His first inclination was that Drogeda had dispelled them, but she was still not facing him when he looked.

Sarandhu suddenly screamed out and clutched his head. His thoughts reeling and swirling, he found he could not collect his thoughts.

Danei did not reach the ogre before its heavy club came down at her. She rolled aside and avoided the blow by mere inches.

Arathane released his arrow at the Orcish archer, the archer's eyes popped out as it realized its fate and fell to the ground clutching the arrow embedded in its chest.

Danei sidestepped the armoured Orc and closed the gap with the Ogre. She swung twice across the ogre's thick skin, but her third swing slashed across the throat of the Orcish berserker that had attacked her.

Sibra decided to help Danei and turned his hands towards the ogre ghostly green figures flew from his hands, they were birds with human faces, wrapped in vines. They dived and scratched at the ogre.

Grimtok seeing his friend in trouble cut across the path of the last still charging Orc and charged to her rescue. His speed was not the greatest and it would take a little while to close the gap so he shouted for her to have courage. His voice seemed to raise her spirits. However, as he charged, two Orcs hidden by the foliage and brandishing curved blades, stepped out of their hiding places swinging their blades at him. Grimtok barely felt the cuts that they made across him, but they impeded his progress to his friend.

Two more of these types of Orcs stepped out of hiding and threw spears aimed at Darva. Darva, despite all of her magical protections, found herself clipped by both spears. She now focused on the pair of assailants.

Karzden stepped up to meet the charging Orc cutting it across the leg with his axe.

Drogeda closing her eyes chanted to bring life back to Keron, his head stopped bleeding and a small glow of light brought him back to the world of the living. His wounds from the mace would be completely gone aside from a minor scar.

The orcish berserker still stood over him frothing at its wide, sharp-toothed mouth howling for its next challenge from the party. Both of Keron's swords found the belly of the Orc that had smashed him to the ground. It howled in pain and thrashed as he kicked it off of him.

Kayla fired two shots into one of the Orcs that had appeared in the battle late. It held a curved blade and was wearing chain armour, which did it no good. It dropped to the ground.

Darva pointed a wand at the second Orc that had thrown the spear and uttering a word a sphere of fire encompassed him. The Orc screamed and fell to the ground writhing in flames.

Sarandhu couldn't seem to pull his thoughts together to cast a spell, but he knew what had happened. He turned to Drogeda, "Priestess, get rid of this spell on me! I can't cast!" She gave him a glaring look, "I smelled the death you just summoned caster, we don't need your kind of spells. You have knives, use them!" She was cold when she spoke.

Hailian's battle axe chopped through the second Orc she faced cleaving it in two, and she continued to hack at it after it fell to the ground before rushing on towards the Orc that had gotten passed her earlier and was facing Karzden.

Shade moved around the skirmish behind Hailian and raising his hand he slung five more blades, three at one skeleton and two at the other. Both skeletons shattered as the first magical blade smashed through them.

The Orcish leader came up behind Danei and with two strokes left cuts across her skin that could have easily been the end of her had it not been for her quick reflexes.

The three Orcs that had been thrown by Darva's windstorm now charged forward from the back of the party having gone all the way around the storm.

The Orc facing Karzden rushed passed him straight towards Darva and swung his axe. She barely avoided the attack coming from behind her, thanks to Karzden's warning. Karzden cursed his legs for being so much shorter than the Orcs, who were much faster than dwarves.

Strangely enough the Orcs that attacked Grimtok ran away into the midst of the party. One headed for Sibra who adequately defended himself, and the other towards Drogeda who easily deflected its attack. Grimtok was confused as to why they didn't try to target just one opponent and finish him off. Orcs! They had no honour.

Suddenly the two Orcs that had thrown the spears stood up, their wounds healed, they moved in towards the party again. Arathane knew someone was behind this, but whom?

A human female warrior also appeared from the woods charging towards Grimtok, she was identical to Danei!

This time, the ogre's heavy club clipped Danei. Being this close to the large warrior was unnerving even for her. She was getting clumsy and now her shoulder would ache for it.

Arathane moved quickly into the woods and took careful aim at his new target, an Orc dressed in robes standing behind a tree. It had been standing there casting spells into the fray without being exposed to the battle. He didn't bother to hide; it hadn't seen him yet. His arrow sunk into the back of the Priest of the Stars' red robe, and it fell to the ground. Then he noticed another figure, this one was cloaked in black and wearing a helm. He looked in the direction that the cloaked figure did and noticed Danei running passed another Danei that faced the ogre and the armoured Orc.

The "Danei" that faced the ogre jumped back to avoid being crushed by its shear size slashing at her. Her first slice grazed its flesh, her second swing missed completely, but her third swing sunk deep into the ogre's throat. It grabbed its jugular and as blood spurted out it fell back with a crash to the ground thrashing in desperation.

The chain mailed Orc that attacked Sibra found two furious claws in its face and it fell to the ground.

Grimtok continued his charge towards what appeared to be Danei running directly at him. "Come then Doppelganger!" he shouted as he swung his battleaxe. His first attack cut across her armour clipping her leg, the second missed entirely, but his third grazed her arm. "You are a quick creature!" Danei's visage just smiled wickedly.

Karzden turned and threw a second throwing axe at the Orc that had passed him and attacked. Darva, the axe struck him under the chin; its head popped up on one side, blood splashing forth.

Drogeda looked from Grimtok's situation to Sarandhu's frustrated face. She decided that denying Grimtok from this fight maybe more detrimental than straightening out Sarandhu's thoughts. She summoned the

power from the light and Sarandhu finally stopped reeling from his rage. He smiled; it was not a warm smile at all.

Keron turned to face the armoured Orc; on his second swing he managed to cut in to the warrior's arm.

Kayla dropped one of the three charging Orcs with two arrows, as seemed to be her trademark. The first arrow always slowed down the target so that the second arrow would find its mark.

Darva deciding that the Orcs were too close, phased into thin air, although still visible she had become a ghostly form. She was untouchable except by magic. She moved in close to distract the green skinned fiends from Kayla who was standing far too close.

Sarandhu gave a wicked smile as he finished uttering the words to his next spell. He targeted four different Orcs, the two Orcs closest to him, the leader and the cloaked Orc hiding from Arathane. They all shuddered as a ghostly wisp escaped from their bodies. They seemed to smoke with this wisp continually.

Hailian rushed forward and with a bloodcurdling howl hacked the Orc to pieces that stood over Drogeda, her rage even stronger than before.

Shade reached the Danei that was fighting with Grimtok and decided that the dwarf would take offense if he interfered so he aimed his glove at the cloaked Orc. The first dagger Shade threw hit the Orc in the chest, the others just sunk into the still smoking falling body.

The warrior Orc returned Keron's wrath with two hits and then seeing his own raiding party decimated, decided to run. Keron dropped unconscious to the ground. "Protect me Doppelganger," it hissed to Danei's twin as he passed by.

The Orcish warriors passed through Darva, apparently aware that they could not harm her, and the chain mail wearing cutthroat laid into Kayla; she weaved back and forth amongst the blades. Despite her agile moves, she was definitely hit twice.

The last cutthroat ran at Sibra; Sibra felt the blade cut across his chest when he turned to see his attacker and tried to stay inside of his spirit circle.

Danei's twin, stepping away from Grimtok, took three slashes at Shade; twice Shade felt her blade across his flesh. He cursed himself for getting so close and back peddled to get away from her.

Arathane's arrow grazed past the running Orc, and then he decided to give chase.

Danei checked on Keron, he was all right, just unconscious from the hit. She picked him up and carried him towards Sibra. The others were still facing the last Orcs. She observed the chaos before her.

Sibra called back, "Stay back Danei, their blades are poisoned!" Point blank he clawed the face of his attacker. Its head jerked back and its body flipped over from the slashes, flopping to the ground.

Grimtok pursued the twin; hearing Sibra's words made him notice his wounds were poisoned as well. His three attacks all struck home this time, but it was still not enough. The glow Drogeda had given him winked out of existence.

Karzden's throwing axe sailed harmlessly past one of the warriors attacking Kayla. He seemed annoyed with himself that he had missed.

Keron suddenly became awake, Drogeda's glow surrounding him. Keron not wasting any time charged to Kayla's rescue, leading with a light cut he plunged his second blade deep into the Orcish cutthroat's chain-mailed belly.

Kayla stepped back to give herself enough room to properly fire the bow. The first arrow sunk into the chest of her first target; the second into the arm of the other Orc, now sorely outnumbered.

A circle of electrical energy jumped up around Darva and extending her hands two bolts of energy shot forth directly into the Orc's body; it jerked and fell to the ground.

Sarandhu pointed a bony finger at the last retreating Orc, it seemed to strain with effort now.

Hailian turned and charged after the Doppelganger.

Shade not wanting anymore of the Doppelganger, threw all of his knives at it. The knives sunk deeply in and he backtracked further away from the magical creature.

The Orcish leader continued to run into the forest activating a rune on his battleaxe he began to glow as Grimtok had been.

Danei's other stepped back intercepting Arathane, her sword cutting into his belly as he tried to bypass her and follow the last Orc. He grabbed his belly and dropped to the ground. Her next attacks were at Grimtok who still pursued her. Grimtok took both hits and kept coming at her.

Danei observed the chaos around her and shouted at Kayla, "Girl, why didn't you run? You're an archer? You should keep your distance! Sibra check her wounds! Sibra? Where is he?" She looked around and saw he was tending to others.

"It's okay, it's okay! I took a potion, see!" Kayla smiled at Keron weakly as she held up an empty vial to him, "I just got scared." Keron looked at her belly where the sword had slashed across, "You and me both." There was no blood, but her armour and tunic had been cut clean through. He shook his head, "You're very lucky Kayla. That must have come so close to, well...too close indeed."

Hailian charged the Doppelganger and with her first powerful chop hacked the creature in half, again and again while it disintegrated on the ground.

Grimtok seemed annoyed that his bout had been interrupted, but then felt some burning from his earlier wounds, "I've been poisoned." He said it more matter of fact than with concern. He looked at the magical being disintegrating before him and turning his back checked on Arathane. "Drogeda, Arathane needs your attention!" The others were on their way to help Arathane who lay bleeding on the ground.

Hailian stood over the creature heaving and shaking with rage, her frenzy not subsiding. There were no sounds of battle so she seemed to become calmer as the minutes passed, it would take her some time before she would.

Lady Danei looked down at the girl in the grass with Keron kneeling beside her, "Those were the poisoned blades of the Midnight Clan, Kayla, we must be careful that the poison does not affect you. Sibra will

see to it that you are not poisoned.” Danei left them to see to the others. She seemed distraught that the battle was so disorganized.

Kayla turned to Keron, “How did she become a Knight Keron?”

Keron seemed surprised at first then realized that Kayla had not grown up in his village, or even this side of the realm. “Well, she... you see there were these trolls, and they...” He was cut off, thankfully by Darva’s soft voice, “Perhaps I can tell it better Young Krigen!” Her smile was so warm he felt a rush of blood to his face.

“Certainly Darva! I was never very good at storytelling.”

She bowed to him slightly, “You see young lady Ms. Sharewood grew up under the roof of a farmer.

She was always capable of defending herself, as the story goes, but then one day she encountered some goblins. These were no ordinary goblins, however, these were goblins of the Redtooth Clan responsible for slaying some Nobleman’s guards and stealing away the family for ransom!

She followed them carefully to their lair and evading several traps and guards, found the family within.

Lady Danei knew that the goblins were heavily guarded and trying to free them at that moment might be an impossible task. Making her way back home with some of the proof she would need, she went to the Magistrate. The Magistrate was pleased at the news and began to assemble a small team to free the nobles from their captors. Young Danei was one of the team to go, as she knew the way.

The six rescuers left a deep scar in the Redtooth Clan that day, slaying the seasoned warriors that guarded the family, and a sore wound when they freed the nobles without a single loss to their own.

The return to Kriegan’s Pass was a joyous one, and Danei Sharewood was declared a squire on that day, to study under a knight, Sir Kedwar Arok, until she too became a knight by defeating the Dreadlander Champion, Morlaus, and a gang of trolls that invaded a keep that Keron had mentioned earlier.”

Sibra, whom had come up behind Darva laughed and clapped, “Very good lady Darva, you’re storytelling has improved since I last saw you!”

Darva, who was startled stood up and bowed to Sibra, “Thank-you Sibra, you are too kind.”

“Not true. Your father should be proud!” he smiled broadly, “Now, where’s that little archer girl? There you are! We’ll have to see that you’re not poisoned, now come on...”

Kayla stood up and presented an empty vial to him, “Actually, I took this potion. When Lady Danei told me that I might be poisoned, I didn’t want to take any chances.”

Sibra frowned slightly, “Young girl you should be cautious of your potions out here.”

Kayla looked puzzled, “Why?”

Sibra looked at their surroundings for emphasis, “We’re far from home. Spells can be replaced with rest, but potions cannot be replaced at all.”

The others also looked at the surrounding area, civilization was nowhere in sight, and they knew it would be several days return before they were home.

Sibra added, "It is not just the journey there that you must be prepared for, but the return home as well."

Kayla shifted from one foot to the other, "I understand. I don't know what I was thinking. Things are different here than they are in the Forest of Tears."

Sibra smiled again, "Do not let it worry you, what is done is done. Keep it in mind for next time." He turned and walked over to the others that had gathered together.

From the woods a slender shadow fell across Keron and drawing his sword he turned to the source that had snuck up on him. "Who are you?"

There, before him stood four lithe figures akin to Arathane. High Elves. Two females; one with a bow, a blue cloak and golden hair; one in red armour, sword still sheathed and red hair. The other two were male; one held a staff, blue cloak, silver hair and light blue skin; the last carried a staff, wore a gray cloak, his skin was gray like that of a Dreadlander and his hair was black.

The golden-haired female spoke, "I am Lostbark, and we have come to meet Sharewood of Kriegan's Pass, to aid in her quest to slay the Dragon Aezmophradius-Nidahl."

"Who?" asked Kayla.

Darva answered, "She means Cinder. It's the name of the ancients for the beast."

"Oh," replied Kayla.

"My apologies Varej Lostbark, I was not expecting to see you until we were at the trail marker," bowed Keron.

"You are forgiven warrior," answered Varej. "We should have announced ourselves, it is an old custom I have not yet broken." She bowed in return. "We had heard the noise of battle from the landmark and came to investigate. It would seem you did not need our assistance."

Keron smiled, "We thank-you, for we may very well have."

Varej bowed again in silence and smiled lightly.

Sensing an awkward silence, Darva added in, "If Lady Danei is waiting for you, then we shall take you to her, come this way." The procession followed her down the slope to where the others were watching.

It was a warm and formal introduction between the two groups. There was something odd about the Elven introductions though, they introduced themselves by their last names and added their first names after. Arathane was always introduced by his first name Keron concluded that it must have been the effect of living amongst humans for so long.

There was Varej Lostbark, the last name being a translation from the Elven tongue. She was the obvious leader, and her specialty the bow. A Wood Elf, although similarly light-hearted to the stories of childhood, she seemed to have a serious undertow much like Arathane's.

The elf in the dark blue cloak was named Sabian Frostdale, although he was not named after the Keldornan northern town, his name translated into the same words. He was a wizard and a Sea Elf from the far coast to the west.

In the gray cloak was an elf named Greyhome, his first name was not given for whatever reason that Keron could guess. Perhaps it was unknown. This emotionless elf was a Stone Elf, and from the fables that were told to Keldornan children, a perfect example of one. He too was a wizard.

The last elf was Faeroes Brightspark, a Fire Elf. She was a warrior like Danei, but carried a proud “noble-born” essence with her. It was difficult for Keron to imagine her charging into any battle in a blood lust. Perhaps the stories were just that, then, stories.

Keron learned that the elves served the Fairies for a portion of their lives; were often sent on errands by the Fairies of the Sylvan Woods. This was one of those errands, but Varei had requested it. A Fairy named Pharavellosa, agreed, as Varei was already familiar to Danei. Keron could not guess how though, Danei had never mentioned meeting elves to him before. Of course it was not so far fetched as occasionally elves did pass through Kriegan’s Pass, just not as much as dwarves did. Their home, the Eternal Tree, was in the Northeast corner of the realm deep in the Sylvan Forests. It was a long trek across the Keldornan Grasslands to Kriegan’s Pass, and it was said that elves preferred the comfort of trees to the open ground.

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Danei walked with Sibra, “One question I do have is: what is a local hero from Frostdale doing in Kriegan’s Pass? Awful far from home isn’t she?”

“Aren’t we all?” Sibra smiled smartly as he said this.

“Do you think she heard that we were going after the beast? And if they heard we were all the way up in Frostdale, why hasn’t anyone come down from Keldorna?”

Sibra smiled, “Grimtok told me how they caught up to us so quickly.”

“Really? How would he know?”

“It was Drimot. Karzden teleported them here with some potions, Shade paid him quite well for it too. Grimtok was embarrassed, I overheard him chastising Karzden for it.”

“Indeed. Those potions are not cheap either and they would have needed six to do that. Finding a wizard who knows the markers or has a glyph may very well have raised too much suspicion. Shade must really be planning on collecting a fortune.”

“I’m sure he is.”

Keron caught up to the pair, “Hey Lady Danei, how come you never mentioned meeting the elves before?”

“How do you think Arathane came to join us?”

Keron thought about it, “But he came alone after the...the attack.”

“Yes, but he knew my family, just like Varej knows my father. By name.”

He shook his head, “I don’t understand. When did you meet them?”

She smiled, “I never have.”

Dumbfounded, Keron almost stopped dead in his tracks, “Huh?”

Danei continued on, “Why do you think elves put such importance on their last names Keron?”

“I don’t know, I thought it was just their way.”

She looked at him as she walked, “They see bloodlines through names to determine a person’s value. At some point they knew my father, Sharewood is an Elven name that he adopted as a gift. Danei is Elven too actually, I believe. It was the name my mother had given me.”

Keron stumbled, “How come you never told me this before?”

She raised an eyebrow, “What does it matter Keron? I am the same Danei Sharewood I have always been.”

He fumbled with his words, “But, you...you’re...a, part elf!”

Danei stopped and grabbed his arm, “Do not make such declarations Keron!” She looked over his shoulder. She shook her head with a wry smile as she began to walk again, “I am no elf, my mother was no elf. It was out of honour, that is all.”

Keron shrugged, “Oh. But it is a rather interesting story don’t you think?”

Sibra laughed, “Of course it is son! Wouldn’t you agree Danei?”

“Of course,” She answered flippantly barely acknowledging the pair.

“What would be even more interesting is if Danei’s mother were an elf that had herself transformed into a human so that she could marry her father!” he felt rather pleased with himself over that one.

Danei’s glare almost crucified Sibra to the spot.

“What did I say?” he chided.

“Quit filling the boy’s head with your insipid notions Sibra!” This was the first time that Keron had seen Danei truly annoyed with Sibra’s boisterous personality. She turned and walked ahead of them.

Keron looked at the confused look on Sibra’s shifty-eyed face.

“Interesting fantasies you have Sibra,” came Arathane’s quiet voice from behind him. Sibra jumped with a start, “Perhaps you should be more wary of your tongue around more noble blood.”

Keron saw a knife in Arathane's hand slide silently back into its sheath. Arathane saw the boy's glance and smiled, "Do you really think a High Elf would stoop to such a thing?" No one else was close enough to see the threat or even hear what Sibra had said about Danei's mother. As Arathane moved ahead Sibra gulped and placing his hands on his knees and with his head down he chuckled.

Keron patted him on the back, "You sure know the right things to say don't you?"

Sibra smiled, "It's not my fault, I'm a barbarian! I was raised on a mountainside with goats and spirits! I'm not responsible for my manners! Curse it, too many eggs on the ground! You know I eat with my hands too..." Sibra carried on like this for a while longer, until he grew bored and began to tease Darva about becoming an adventurer and wearing such elegant clothing, wondering if she was trying to find a man out in the wilderness. She played along with him, it was plain that she was good at entertaining him, and he liked that. Elves and dwarves had too many conducts for his liking, far too many.

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They stayed crouched down as they moved through the gray gnarled trees. Up ahead Arathane and Vareid waited for the others, bows knocked, but not drawn. They peered around the sides of trees up a rocky slope towards a large black cavern that waited ominously silent.

"Is that it?" asked Darva in awe.

Kayla looked at her, "Do you see any other caverns around?"

Hailian bent over them, "How do you know this is the right one?" She walked away after dropping the idea in their laps, obviously not caring one way or the other.

Keron looked over from his nearby cover, "Don't worry, this is the one. Grimtok's family has known its location for centuries, even before it was hers."

Hailian smiled as she stood out in the open and stared up at the mountain.

"What is she doing?" asked Keron.

Shade smiled, "She's preparing herself."

He seemed anxious, "Can she do it behind a tree?"

Hailian smiled, "Do you really think that tree is going to protect you if it comes out of there?"

Keron was about to rebuttal, but then he looked at the tree he leaned against and began to reflect on the memories from his childhood stories. He backed away from the tree.

Lady Danei looked back at them, "Hailian get behind a tree, we're not ready yet. And it may be hours before we see her. She's supposed to be deep inside somewhere, with her hidden treasure." Hailian did not move. Shade spoke up, "Hailian!" She turned her head towards him calmly and then turning away went and sat behind a gray tree.

"No fires, everybody eat their rations," Danei announced. "We're going inside in one hour."

The group sat and pulled out their dried rations and water skins. They all stayed on edge facing different directions. Sibra decided to take a nap. Greyhome, Sabian and Sarandhu eventually buried themselves in spell books. Drogeda left the others and began her prayer ritual. Sibra awoke to the sound of metal hacking into the wood; it was Hailian hacking at a dead tree trunk just feet from his head. After he muttered to her under his breath he began to meditate forcing on the spirits he summoned power from.

It was a long time before anyone spoke.

“Where are Arathane and Varej going?” asked Darva softly.

Danei looked back, “They’re going to check the entrance.”

They watched as the pair of elves vanished into thin air with a softly spoken word from each of them. Almost everyone watched with intense anticipation, expecting at any moment that the mountainside would explode with the fury that it held within. They could see nothing, and that was the worst of all. The pair would have to journey to the cavern and inside alone. They sat in silence.

Hailian’s breath behind them grew in intensity, but fortunately not much in volume. Keron found himself looking back at her. She stood at the ready, sword in hand, ready to burst into a full charge at the first sign of their prey.

He looked around at the company as they watched. Only Kayla, Sibra and the elves seemed at ease, if that word could be used. Even Grimtok and Danei were coiled like pressed springs. The others waited at the ready, their breath held as long as possible, waiting for any sound or sign of trouble.

It was not long before Varej returned, the fifteen minutes, which seemed like an eternity. She reported back that the cavern was rough-cut and went in several meters before splitting in to several separate caverns inside. One main corridor continued inside; there was no sign of their target.

Arathane stayed near the cavern to keep watch. Varej would have continued further if not for the time limitations of the spell.

The signal was given and the group began to walk up the rugged path in single file, spread out to avoid becoming entangled in case of trouble.

The cavern entrance was dark and ominous as the wind blew through it as though it were a living creature itself. They vanished inside, the darkness washing over them like a waterfall as the sun set in the distance, its red light unable to reach them anymore.